

Understanding user needs: additional international net migration estimate excluding international students

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# Contact information

#### Enquiries to: pop.info@ons.gov.uk

#### Accessibility

All material relating to this consultation can be provided in braille, large print or audio formats on request. British Sign Language interpreters can also be requested for any supporting events.

#### Quality assurance

This consultation has been carried out in accordance with the government’s consultation principles, available here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>.

If you have any complaints about the way this consultation has been conducted, please email: pop.info@ons.gov.uk

# Outcome of this engagement exercise

Following the user feedback received, a decision has been made not to publish an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students at this time. We will continue to develop additional analysis relating to both students and other migrant groups and review how we can make it easier for our users to understand what is available.

# Background

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) undertook an engagement exercise to understand user needs regarding an additional international net migration estimate which excludes students. A survey ran for seven weeks from 10 January 2025 to 28 February 2025. We also consulted with topic experts via focus groups at the Migration Statistics Expert Group (MSEG) on 4 February 2025, the Migration Statistics Steering Group (MSSG) on 6 February 2025, and the UK Population Theme Advisory Board (UKPTAB) on 12 February 2025. This allowed us to gather feedback on three options on international net migration excluding students and to identify any user needs for an additional estimate of international net migration.

International students who stay in the UK for 12 months or more meet the United Nations definition of a long-term international migrant and we therefore include them in international net migration estimates. We are aware of potential stakeholder interest for an additional estimate based on a definition that does not include international students and therefore sought user feedback to gain a better understanding of wider views and seek more detailed information on relevant user needs. We also undertook this exercise to explore options, and to see if there were any specific areas of research or policy which may benefit from an additional estimate of international net migration.

The three options were presented to respondents along with strengths and limitations of each (see Annex A). The options are outlined below.

**Option 1:** Maintain the current approach.

This option does not lead to any changes in the analysis we produce. We will continue to produce [estimates of international net migration in line with the UN definition](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/bulletins/longterminternationalmigrationprovisional/previousreleases) as well as [additional analysis on international students](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/reasonforinternationalmigrationinternationalstudentsupdate/previousreleases). We will not produce an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students.

**Option 2:** Produce an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students using existing published estimates by reason for migration.

This option provides an additional, alternative estimate of international net migration, using a simple method that subtracts existing estimates of net migration of those initially arriving in the country for study reasons from overall international net migration. This method excludes students even if they subsequently remain in the UK for work or other reasons.

**Option 3:** Additional, alternative estimate of international net migration, using visa information to exclude students.

This option is the development of a method that uses visa information to exclude students from international net migration. Immigration and emigration would be based on being present in the country for 12 months or more on a non-student visa. This method only excludes students who remain on a student visa and then leave.

# Summary of responses

There was an overall preference for not introducing an additional international net migration estimate that excludes international students. This was largely due to concern around the confusion multiple estimates based on different definitions may create, as well as that any change may be perceived as a political decision that could reduce trust in official migration statistics. While some users identified potential benefits of additional information on student migration being made available, an additional estimate of net international migration excluding students was not viewed as a user priority. However, there was support for other additional analysis being provided where possible.

Feedback from both the survey and the focus groups provided a broadly similar range of views.

The survey received 43 responses from a range of stakeholders. These consisted of;

* 22 responses from individuals
* 12 responses from academia, charities, and other groups
* 6 responses from other government departments
* 3 responses from local authorities in England and Wales

The overall feedback on the use of international migration statistics showed our users find them useful for a broad range of purposes. These included analysing population change, academic research, monitoring net international migration, service provision and demand planning, as well as personal interest and understanding.

## Rank of preferences

Respondents were asked to rank the three options in preference order. Option 1 was ranked as the first choice of 51% of respondents. Option 2 was ranked as the first choice of 26% of respondents, with 23% ranking option 3 as their first choice. These results also reflected views from the focus groups.

*Figure 1: Around half of respondents ranked option 1 as their first preference in this engagement exercise.*



# Detailed responses

Feedback in the survey and the focus groups seemed to reflect similar themes. Views expressed on each option are discussed in turn.

## Option 1 – Maintain the current approach

Users stated the current methods meet their needs in that they conform to United Nations standards and therefore allow clear international comparisons. It was frequently raised that students impact population change, the economy, and services and therefore should be considered part of the international migration figures and subsequently population figures.

“Migrants on study visas still use public services, rent accommodation, can work part time, and therefore very much a part of the wider impact on the UK. For a student on a 3-year undergraduate course, it would be difficult to argue that their impact on UK services is significantly different during these 3 years, as a skilled worker on a 3-year visa.”

Concerns were raised around the risk of having multiple estimates for international migration, and how this might become confused with multiple definitions of international migration. Users raised the potential challenges in explaining multiple estimates and the methodological caveats of each, which may result in detail getting lost and therefore be damaging to discourse around international migration.

“Our concern is that producing two sets of net migration estimates, one which includes international students and another which excludes them, will confuse the public while encouraging those seeking to reduce net migration to over-emphasise the role of international students in these figures. Neither approach will enhance the public’s understanding of the student migration journey or will impact the government’s approach to immigration policy”

Our users raised concerns with the perception of having multiple international migration estimates, there were views this may be perceived by the public as misleading. As migration can be a politically sensitive topic, our users were concerned that having multiple estimates may be perceived as a political decision and therefore reduce the trust in international migration statistics. Our users flagged the potential misuse of multiple estimates to suit differing narratives as a concern.

Some of our users raised concern around the limited detail of the current estimates and that it would be beneficial to better understand some of the mechanisms underpinning migration, which go beyond total annual international net migration. Users were generally in favour of a more detailed understanding of student migration than the current estimates allow.

“We do not believe an additional estimate of net migration that excludes students would be helpful in enhancing understanding of the impact of international students on both short and long-term migration trends. There is however a huge need for more nuanced information on the entirety of the student migration journey.”

## Option 2 – Provide an additional estimate using existing published data

Users who preferred option 2 stated the benefits of it being a relatively simple and easy to understand method. Users highlighted that it is possible to calculate this figure already using data provided by the Office for National Statistics, so that in practice this change may be more presentational than offering an additional insight. Some described the benefit of users no longer needing to calculate this themselves and therefore save time and reduce the risks of error in calculating this.

“As far as I am concerned, the student impact on net migration is already reported on by ONS figures. Therefore, anyone who requires student impact removed can already calculate this impact.”

Users highlighted that more granularity offered by option 2 may be of interest to provide a clearer understanding around the impact of Higher Education on international migration. Some users suggested that analysing student migration separately may have potential uses in demand modelling.

When describing option 2 users frequently referred to the downsides around the confusion of having multiple estimates, and a preference to sticking to option 1. Users raised concerns that option 2 might not be well understood due to the caveats around using this figure, which may not give any additional useful insights into migration policy.

“Too much simplification around a complicated topic”

## Option 3 – Provide an additional estimate using visa information to exclude students

Users who preferred option 3 stated the benefits of more granularity and the enhanced understanding this may bring. Users were generally in favor of ONS providing more detail underlying the long-term international migration (LTIM) estimates.

Users were generally in favour of a greater understanding of how students impact international migration and more detailed elements of migrant journeys, such as visa switching. However, users suggested that, though this option may be of general interest, it is not necessarily a priority and may take resource from producing other insights.

“Can see a potential small benefit to having the extra breakdowns in 3, concern is there’s an opportunity cost – whoever’s working to develop these could be working on a more useful thing. Yes, a small net benefit but a net disadvantage considering limited resource.”

Our users raised concerns around the methodological complexity of this option, and that there may be challenges communicating the caveats to users. Concerns were raised around the increased risk of measurement error with this method, which in turn would increase confusion and misinterpretation around the international migration figures.

“Option 3 is extremely messy and complicated and is hard to understand. It won't give a clear picture of inflows and outflows over a particular time period and will be hard to interpret.”

Our users also raised concerns around treating this as a headline estimate, suggesting it may be more appropriate as a standalone piece of research.

## Other user needs and suggestions received

Through this engagement exercise our users have provided a range of suggestions for the future development of statistics on student migration as well as for international migration statistics in general.

Our users have indicated that they would find it beneficial to have more detailed information around student migration to help better understand international migration and therefore better inform migration policy. Several suggestions were made about information that users would find more useful than the three options presented in this feedback exercise.

“In setting Option 1 as our preference, we do not believe that the ONS should ‘do nothing’ – however, there are significant concerns over the implications for the public understanding of migration data and public policy from both Option 2 and Option 3.”

**Suggestions put forward by our users on student migration included:**

* carrying out analysis on EU students to develop our [Reason for international migration, international students update](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/articles/reasonforinternationalmigrationinternationalstudentsupdate/november2024)
* creating rolling 3-, 5-, and 7-year rolling averages of international net migration to account for the impact of different student migration journeys
* longer term forecasts on the impact of international migration on population stocks
* numbers around how many students come in as short-term migrants
* disaggregating between those who have a route to settlement and those who do not
* numbers around what student migrants do after studying, including transition to other visas and economic impact as well as departures
* more information on the length and type of study of student migrants
* more breakdowns by nationality or country of origin of student migrants

**Some suggestions for international migration statistics in general included:**

* estimates at a lower level of geography, which many of our users have stated would help to better target provisions and policy
* further breakdowns of the migration statistics and migrant journeys, such as age and nationality of migrants, and visa type changes
* longer term estimates or rolling averages of migration. Our users have stated this would help to better understand the context and implications of fluctuations in migration figures

# Conclusions and actions

The feedback from this stakeholder engagement exercise indicated there are mixed opinions on whether ONS should produce an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students.

A small majority (just over half of respondents) indicated a preference for option 1 to maintain the current approach and were not in favour of producing such an estimate. Of those who were in favour of ONS publishing such an estimate (options 2 and 3), a large proportion indicated that the information that can already be calculated from published data was sufficient for their needs.

Following the outcome of this stakeholder engagement a decision has been made not to publish an additional estimate of international net migration excluding students at this time.

However, our users have also reported several areas where more granularity and additional information on both international students and wider international migration would be useful and desirable. We will therefore continue to develop additional analysis relating to both students and other migrant groups and review how we can make it easier for our users to understand what is available.

We will also review the suggestions provided by users through this consultation exercise and look for opportunities to take these forward as part of our research and development work. We will also seek advice on our priorities for this work from the new [National Statistician’s Advisory Panel on Migration Statistics](https://uksa.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/announcing-the-new-chair-of-the-national-statisticians-advisory-panel-on-migration-statistics/) that has been set up to provide independent advice on the quality and use of long-term international migration estimates.

We appreciate the time respondents took to share their views and would like to thank them for taking part in the engagement exercise. Their feedback continues to shape our work and we will keep users informed of our plans to develop international migration estimates.

To share any other feedback on our international migration statistics or on the outcome of this engagement exercise please contact us at pop.info@ons.gov.uk.

# Annex A – Options presented to respondents

**Option 1:** Maintain the current approach.

This option does not lead to any changes in the analysis we produce. We will continue to produce our publications including reason for international migration; international students update. We will not produce an additional estimate of net migration.

**Benefits**

* Avoids the risk of confusion from having two estimates of net migration produced by the ONS

**Limitations**

* There may be some users whose needs are not met by our current suite of statistics and publications
* Does not add any new information

**Option 2:** Produce an additional, alternative estimate of net migration using the simple method of subtracting net migration of those initially arriving for study reasons from net migration.

The approach to this option is to exclude those arriving on a study-related visa from both immigration and emigration estimates. For non-EU nationals, this will be based on visa information and IPS self-reported reason for migration may be used for others. The 'study-related' category includes both those arriving on study visas and their dependents. Regardless of how long someone stays in the country, and whether they transition onto another visa, they will not be included in this alternative net migration estimate.

For example:

* 22% of those who arrived in Year Ending (YE) June 2019 on a study-related visa were still in the country in June 2024; none of this group will be included in the net migration estimate under this option
* 47% of those arriving in YE June 2023 on a study-related visa had transitioned onto another visa type (compared to 3% of those arriving YE June 2019); none of this group will be included in the net migration estimate under this option.

With this method:

* Immigration = all arrivals *minus* arrivals for those arriving on a study-related visa
* Emigration = all departures *minus* departures for those arriving on a study-related visa
* Net migration = immigration *minus* emigration

**Benefits**

* Provides an additional estimate while our official estimate of net migration remains unchanged
* Quick method to implement
* Can be estimated for all nationality groups, including EU, non-EU and British

**Limitations**

* Risks confusion by having 2 estimates of net migration produced by the ONS
* Does not show change in student behaviours and patterns of stay over time
* At any given point in time does not directly reflect patterns of student or other moves – it shows net effect of new arrivals vs those leaving after varying lengths of stay in the country (some after many years)
* It doesn’t reflect change of visa/reason, missing, for example, students who stayed and joined the labour market who will be included in “student” net migration when they leave the country.

**Option 3**: Additional, alternative estimate of net migration using visa information to exclude students.

This method produces an estimate using visa information to exclude students from estimates. Immigration and emigration will still be based on being present in the country for 12 months or more *on a non-student visa.*

Immigration would be estimated by taking into account everyone who arrived on a non-student visa combined with students who have transitioned onto a different visa type *and* stays for 12 months or more.

Students who remain in the country on a student visa only will not be included in immigration or emigration estimates regardless of whether they have stayed in the country for more than 12 months. Immigration estimates are based on the date they transition to a non-study visa, and not on their arrival date within the UK. If a student transfers onto another visa type following their study and leaves within the first 12 months, they will not be included in either immigration or emigration estimates under this definition.

Given the recent proportion of students transitioning to other visas, this method may exclude a smaller number of people from net migration estimates. With this method:​

* Immigration = all non-student arrivals in period *plus* previous student arrivals who have moved to work/family/other visa in period​
* Emigration = all departures in period *minus* previous student arrivals who depart at end of study visa during period (who have not moved to another visa type)​
* Net migration = Immigration *minus* Emigration

**Benefits**

* Provides an additional estimate while our official estimate of net migration remains unchanged
* More nuanced method for producing an estimate of net migration excluding students, taking into account migrant journeys
* Produces an estimate of net migration that excludes only those long-term migrants who arrive, study and leave without joining “non-student” population

**Limitations**

* Risks confusion by having 2 estimates of net migration produced by the ONS
* More complex methodological development required taking longer, including understanding impact on assumptions made to create provisional estimates
* Currently limited to non-EU nationals. Potential to extend to EU visa holders in future
* The net migration estimate using this method would show immigration of students transitioning to another visa who arrived in the country during previous periods
* Definitional issues: does not meet UN definition of a long-term migrant; former students who briefly work could be counted as short-term despite staying 12 months or more; point of “immigration” not consistent with actual arrival in country



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